



Discovery of the 'New World'

Who was Columbus and what did he really achieve? - Part 1



The Monument of Discovery in Lisbon, led by the statue of Henrique the Navigator.

Guest Column



By Alessandro Giustolisi

In 1492, the world was characterised by four important events that changed the course of history. There was the expulsion of the Moors – the last Muslim population with origins mostly from North Africa – from the Granada region of the Iberian Peninsula. Second was the Alhambra Decree, also known as the Edict of Expulsion, which saw the expulsion of those who were not Catholic from the Crowns of Castile and Aragon and its territories and possessions. The third event was the official end of the Middle Ages, also known as the Dark Ages, when the world had the largest standoff in its history considered a dark age that started with the fall of the Western Roman Empire in 476 AD. Finally, there was the European discovery of the New World (Nuevo Mundo in Spanish) 531 years ago, on October 12, 1492, by Christopher Columbus, a supposed Italian navigator from the Republic of Genoa who thought he had landed on the Asian continent, which was his destination. Later in 1501, Amerigo Vespucci, another Italian navigator of Firenze, realising it was a completely new continent, renamed it the Americas and that was never changed again.

The native people of what we consider today the Americas could say that 1492 was the year of their disgrace, since from that day, due to the insertion of other populations, various illnesses began to spread. This together with the European's advanced weapons and technologies brought the decimation of the indigenous populations, its culture, its history, local cities and monuments. In the first 200 years, a population made up of mostly men from Europe came searching for work and looking for profitable goods or the production of any raw material from this new territory, directing the riches they accumulated back into Europe.

During this period, the slavery business started and consolidated very well. A systematic system of abuse of local indigenous people and black Africans was adopted up until two centuries ago, leaving enormous consequential damages that still can be seen today. There were some exceptions; some Europeans, mostly religious ones, actually came to find a new life because poor people or their religious beliefs were not much accepted in Europe, like the Quakers, Mormons, and Jews, among others.

Those four events not only transformed the population of many regions, resulting in large diasporas but also influenced the change in religions, wars, the creation of colonialism and



The first map by Juan de la Cosa of 1500 showing the New World, but no details, only abstract coasts.

the slavery system, the rise of new empires and the decline of others. Of those four events, the European discovery of the Americas is the only one which today we only know the official narrative. However, in my research, there are many completely different facts, starting before 1492 and after, that could change the date when the developed countries of Europe, the Mediterranean and Asia assumed what today we call the Americas.

I believe the discovery of the Americas and even that of other territories like Australia, Oceania, and Antarctica, after researching different sources, are not well documented and contain several inconsistencies. Even though I am not a historian or archaeologist like my father, I have learned from him and since I love to investigate historical facts – and in today's world all types of information are easily available – I would like to suggest that the Caribbean was visited by Europeans long before 1492.

I think it is absurd that our children are still learning this old narrative, especially when there are new documents accessible to the public, online, that challenge it. Who knows how many other historical 'facts' could have a new version today if more people would look to new evidence?

One may ask: Why is it so important to know who landed first on our shores and when? I think it is important to know who we are and the truth about our history, which is part of our heritage, our asset. Heritage, in my view, is not only about historical buildings or monuments but our total history-related facts and all material evidence. The more heritage we have, the more we can offer to our tourists as attractions. Our Caribbean islands have never developed a truly archaeological

plan to search our territories and seas. I'm sure if we did, we could find some surprises, like some relic or building dating back to early 1400 or even before that, which could attract a different type of tourist. Today, many countries in Europe, Asia, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru get these types of tourists, foreign and domestic, all year round, including students.

To understand more about our negative chapter of slavery and the 'forced or persuaded' conversion to Christianity, it is very important to understand what pushed the discovery, what was behind it, and who were the actors on both sides – Europe/Middle East and Africa.

During the Middle Ages, the Church in Rome was a superpower and all the monarchs in Europe were submissive to the Church's decisions. All land discoveries had four main purposes: to open more trade routes between European and Asian markets for economic reasons; get more economic wealth and create more commercial bases overseas to strengthen political power; the Church and colonial powers were in cahoots and were using an excuse to spread Christianity in new areas and among populations that were considered 'wild'; and to reduce the economic, political and religious power of the Muslim world, which at that time was represented mostly by the new (Turkish) Ottoman Empire, having the monopoly of all trade between Europe and Asia.

The Middle East territory at that time was the main transit area for important products for European consumers, since Africa was not explored and considered a wild region without anything of interest, and Europeans at that time did not know about the North American continent. The Church at that time was not admitting to transit through a Muslim country.

While the history books refer to Columbus discovering the 'civilised man' in the New World, artefacts found in North America and Brazil point to the possibility of Phoenicians having arrived in the Americas before Columbus. In fact, in the Caribbean, some Phoenician artefacts are held in the Botanical Gardens in Kingstown, St Vincent and the Grenadines.

Reference to 'civilised' and 'wild men' was used by the church, in the name of Christianity, to start the biggest business in colonisation, not only in the Americas but in Asia, Africa and Oceania. In the name of Christianity, slavery was created. Companies like the Dutch West India Company, and the East India Company, among others, made their fortunes off the backs of the colonised territories and territories with which they could trade using the labour of the local populations.

What is so ironic is that most of the owners of these companies and banks were not even 100 per cent Catholics, but rather converted Jews and Protestants. These companies got to a point of having, in some cases, more power in government expansion and the handling of slaves, especially in the British, French and Dutch empires. Today, the descendants of the owners of all these companies are part of the largest world economic conglomerates still operating. So, religious motivation was just an excuse to extract the biggest possible profit without having to pay large operational costs and the need to respect labour rules and human rights (what at that time was only on the conscience of the monarchs, since there were no organisations recognised by states).

What we know, but unfortunately never found clear evidence of, is that between the years 800 and 1000, the Vikings originally from the Scandinavian territories discovered Iceland, and Greenland and had probably set foot in North America. There is some clear evidence that Leif Erikson (Leif the Lucky national of Iceland and Norse), son of Erik the Red, established a settlement in Vinland in Newfoundland, Canada in the L'Anse aux Meadows around the year 1000. Other evidence is in the work of Adam of Bremen, in 1075, and in the Book of Icelanders of Ari de Wise in 1122.

From the year 1000 to 1492 there was a big, black hole that really piqued my curiosity and so, I started my investigation from this exact point. There is information about an alleged Chinese fleet of 500-foot ships that sailed on March 8, 1421, to Europe and made other voyages till 1423, to try to create some new routes through the Pacific. On this journey, they came across the American coast, but it was not considered a success since they couldn't reach Europe, having found only undeveloped territories.

Europeans and Asians, mostly Chinese, wanted to avoid the



Statue of Leif Erikson in Reykjavik, Iceland.

middleman in the trade between them and at that time, there were two routes: one reaching the Arabic, then Turkish, ports, transferring everything by land to what is known as the Lebanon and Israel coast and from there to Europe by boat; the second route was through the Mongolian territory in Central Asia. At that time, choosing who to trade with was influenced by which places you could easily get processed goods that were ready to load, which was not the case for undeveloped 'wild' regions. This is why there was no interest in developing 'wild' areas, which was what the Chinese and the Portuguese probably found when they arrived in North America.

From the middle of the 1300s, the Portuguese were sailing the Atlantic Ocean trying to find new routes to expand trade opportunities. With the blessing of the Pope in Rome, they explored the coast of West Africa and fought with the Moors (Arabs of North Africa) to make their way south. In 1394 in Porto, (the second largest city in Portugal), Infante Dom Henrique de Avis, better known as Dom Infante o Navegador/ the Navigator, was born. He spearheaded the first planned exploration of the world. Thanks to his close relations with the royal family, he gathered all the good navigators from the Mediterranean, North Europe and Portugal, and embarked on a journey of discovery, starting in 1414 with Ceuta on the North African coast, today under Spain's control, which he conquered in 1415. Infante Dom Henrique is considered in Portugal perhaps the most iconic historical personality, even above any king or political or cultural figure of any time.

Until 1492, Portugal had no competition in the Atlantic, with the exception of the route to the Canary Islands, which was handed over to Spain. Though they discovered the archipelago, they never really occupied it as they were more interested in creating bases where they could trade and there was nothing to trade in the Canary Islands. It is important to note that in 1444, the Portuguese explorers had already arrived in Senegal, which was much more south than the Canary Islands. So, 48 years before Columbus' purported discovery, the goal of Portugal was to find the way to India (Camino da India), the same as Columbus – this is why our Caribbean islands were called the West Indies (Indias Occidentales). The official order was to find a way to India via West Africa.

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Editor's note: While there is some evidence to suggest that Phoenicians and Vikings may have reached the Americas, this remains a subject of debate among historians and is a topic of ongoing research and discussion. There is also some archaeological and genetic evidence of possible African contact before Columbus' arrival but this, too, is the subject of ongoing research and discussion. Chinese voyages to the Americas in the 15th century are based on the highly controversial theory proposed by British submarine lieutenant commander Gavin Menzies (1937-2020) in his 2002 book, 1421: The Year China Discovered America, but this is not widely accepted among historians, as there is limited concrete evidence to support the claim.

A map of the Portuguese empire of 1573.

